

Organic Farm: A Chance for Renewal
(An Example from North-Eastern Hungary)

Anikó, Báti

Abstract

The paper shows the present situation in an agricultural, multiple disadvantaged village in north-eastern Hungary, where external sources have had to become involved in order to teach people, once again, the very basics of agriculture. It focuses on how a social agricultural project, based on collective approaches to combat a lack of alternatives, has been used as an innovative way of finding an effective solution to the village's infrastructural and social problems, thereby ensuring the village's ongoing viability.

Most of the territory of Hungary is well suited to cultivation.¹ For centuries, agriculture has been the basis of livelihood for broad strata of Hungarian society. However, political, economic and social transformations in the second half of the 20th century utterly changed that situation. In this paper I would like to trace that process – drawing on the example of one village – to show how the present situation came about, that, in an agricultural region, external sources and specialists had to be employed in order to teach people, once again, the basics of agriculture. This paper focuses on a social and agricultural project used as an innovative way, in which to find a solution in collective approaches, to combat a lack of economic alternatives in the village in question.

In the first part of my paper, I shall briefly outline the economic and social historical background to the national processes affecting the whole of agriculture during the twentieth century. In the second half I shall focus on the north-eastern part of the country – one of the multiple disadvantaged regions of Hungary,² and in particular on a single settlement, Hernádszentandrás,³ as an example of the processes of decline and revival of a village community in twentieth century Hungary. On the basis of my recent short-term fieldwork I would like to present this village as a case study of a settlement that succeeded in working out an exemplary solution to its economic and social problems, by placing the resources available to it (arable land, manpower) in the service of sustainable development. I conducted interviews with some participants in the programme concerning their work, and I was able to

¹ The author, Anikó, Báti works for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Centre for Humanities, Institute of Ethnology, Budapest, Hungary.

² For social agricultural projects and public work organized by municipalities and civil societies in the region see: Ildikó, Asztalos Morell, "Social farming as a means of poverty reduction in rural Hungary". 2015. www.socio.hu/uploads/files/2015en_food/asztalos_morell.pdf, accessed 1 August 2016.

³ Hernádszentandrás. www.hernadszentandras.hu, accessed 1 August 2016.

observe the daily operation of the organic farm. I also collected and used articles appearing in the media about the project. As I describe the operation of the organic farm I shall also briefly indicate how all of this is related to traditional peasant knowledge and values, how far it builds on them, and in what ways it also differs from them.

Economic and Social Historical Background

The new boundaries drawn in the peace treaties after the First World War dealt a serious blow to the entire Hungarian economy.⁴ The territory of the country was reduced to one-third of its previous size. The agricultural regions lost part of their markets, and the new borders cut across industrial, trade and transport connections.

The uneven distribution of land ownership was a source of serious social tension in the inter-war years. Two-thirds of the population living in villages either owned no land or had only unviable micro-holdings. This large segment of the population was not in a position to carry out independent economic activity, and their main source of income arose from their work as hired agricultural labourers. For them, acquiring land was the key to social and material betterment.

Land reform was carried out after 1945 and many people became land owners. But from the end of the 1940s, after the communist takeover of power, the structure of agriculture in Hungary, like in the other socialist countries of Central Europe, was gradually transformed in keeping with the communist political agenda. Individual land holdings were eliminated. By 1961, large-scale agricultural cooperatives had been organised throughout the country.⁵ Only

⁴ For the history of Hungary see: Romsics, Ignác: *A Short History of Hungary* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2016); Romsics, Ignác, "Interruption and Continuity in the Twentieth Century History of Hungary", in Marosi, Ernő ed., *On the Stage of Europe* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2009), 250-272; Hoensch, Jörg K., *A History of Modern Hungary 1867-1986* (London/New York: Longman, 1988).

⁵ For the changing rural society see: Sárkány, Mihály, "Studies on changing rural social structure in Hungary in the second half of the 20. Century", in Kilianova G., -Köstlin K., -Nikitsch H., eds., *Ethnology in Slovakia at the beginning of the 21st century. Reflections and Trends. Proceedings of the International Conference dedicated to 55 Jubilee of Institute of Ethnology of Slovak Academy of Sciences* (Bratislava-Wien: Ustav etnologie SAV/UB, 2005), 148-157; Valuch, Tibor, "From long house to squares. Changing village living conditions in sixties Hungary", in Rainer, M. János- Péteri György, eds., *Muddling through in the long 1960s: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary*. Studies On East European Cultures and Societies 16 (Budapest: Trondheim-Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution – Program on East European Cultures and Societies, 2005), 135-159; Swain, Nigel, *Hungary. The Rise and Fall of Feasible Socialism* (London/New York: Verso, 1992); One extraordinary village, for example: Hann, Chris, *Tázlár, a village in Hungary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and more: Hann, Chris: Progress toward Collectivised Agriculture in Tázlár, 1948-1978, in: Hollos, M.-Maday, B. ed., *New Hungarian Peasants. An East-Central European Experience with Collectivization*. East European Monographs 134 (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1983), 69-92.

the small plots of land around the houses were left in private ownership. This was a huge social upheaval.

After 1948, the development of industry became the main direction of socialist economic policy and, to finance it, resources were withdrawn from agriculture. Many people subsequently left agriculture and took up another way of life, by moving to the towns and by working in industry and the service sector. The number of active earners working in agriculture fell steadily. The self-esteem of the peasantry declined. Families that had previously lived from agriculture instead sent their children away to be educated, and these children did not return to the villages, even as adults. Many workers in industry commuted between their village homes and their urban workplaces. It also became the general practice for women to enter employment, thus fundamentally transforming the organisation of households. Traditional peasant society began to disintegrate: the knowledge, skills, behavioural forms and norms, needed for independent farming activity lost their importance, and they were no longer passed down to the next generations. The villages were slowly depopulated and the age profile of the inhabitants gradually increased.

The large-scale agriculture structures that replaced family farming were based on mechanisation, modernisation and the use of chemicals. The workers were employed as wage earners. Trained specialists with secondary and higher qualifications played an increasing role in directing the work. However, parallel with the large-scale agriculture structures, a system of strong, secondary, household-based production, based on household plots producing agricultural produce on a small scale, emerged. The land for this was made available by the cooperatives. Although the plots served primarily for the provision of food for the family, in the goods produced became an important source of supplementary income, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The inhabitants of villages that were deliberately underfinanced by the state were able to use this income to buy prestige goods, not land as their forefathers had done, but rather new houses, electrical appliances, and cars.

After 1990, following change in the political system, a major new restructuring of ownership in agriculture, in line with the market economy framework, emerged.⁶ Once again

⁶ See more: Sárkány, Mihály- Hann Chris, "The Great Transformation in Rural Hungary: Property, Life Strategies and Living Standards", in Chris Hann, *The Postsocialist Agrarian Question. Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia*¹ (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003), 117-141; Romsics Ignác, "Political and economic transformation in Hungary since the change of regime", *Korea Journal of Central and East European Studies*. (September 2012), 37-52; Rainer, M. János, "1989 in Hungary and in Central and Eastern Europe", in Rainer M. János, ed., *1989: Year of Miracles in Hungary and Europe* (Budapest: The Government of the Republic of Hungary, 2009), 9-17; Valuch Tibor, "Social transformation and changes in daily life in Hungary, during the period of the change of system", *Metszetek. Társadalomtudományi Folyóirat*. 3/1 (2014), 2005-2014; One village, for example: Sárkány, Mihály, "Restudy of Varsány: entrepreneurs and property in rural Hungary after

land passed back into actual private ownership. Previous owners received securities, proportionate to the size of their original holdings, as compensation from the state that could be used to buy land. The agricultural cooperatives were dissolved, with the loss of many jobs. Together with this, the system of household plots also came to an end. Due to the restructuring of agriculture output fell by 50% in the 1990s!

However, despite the political and agricultural-ownership changes, very few returned to the earlier form of agriculture as independent farmers; consequently, village society was essentially plunged into crisis. Many people were unable to rebuild the household-based family farms because of the lack of sufficient capital. In addition, the small plots that could be obtained as compensation could not be cultivated profitably, using modern methods. Furthermore, the knowledge needed for independent farming had been lost, or what still existed had become obsolete over the decades. Only those with sufficient expertise, and with the financial and relational capital necessary to buy cheap land and the machinery needed to cultivate it, were able to build up viable farms. For this reason, many people today do not cultivate their land but lease it to others. A narrow stratum of small-scale private producers have emerged, but their survival in this capacity remains very uncertain. Actually, their numbers have been falling in recent years.⁷

After 1990, industrial production also entered a crisis, with many factories closing down. Workers who had earlier commuted to urban areas to work in industry returned to the villages as they were unemployed. At the same time, the subsidiary industrial branches of agricultural cooperatives that had employed mainly women also disappeared, further adding to the number of villagers struggling with livelihood problems. Thus, by the early years of the 21st century, the substantial part of the population, mainly with a low level of education, who no longer wanted to live from agriculture but could not find work elsewhere, created a permanent underclass of a marginalized population dependent on welfare subsidies. Municipalities, as redistributors of state resources, are responsible for providing welfare resources for these people. Public works organized by the municipalities is a construct that linked to state support for the long term unemployed.⁸

1989”, in Skálnik P., ed., *Anthropology of Europe. Teaching and Research*. Prague Studies in Sociocultural Anthropology 3.(Prague: Set Out, 2005), 143-151.

⁷ 1,4 million households were engaged with agricultural production in 1991. The number of these declined to 618 thousand by 2007 and to 482 thousand by 2013. Half of the farms produced products only for self-consumption, and an additional 32% sold beyond their own consumption; see Ildikó, Asztalos Morell, “Social farming as a means of poverty reduction in rural Hungary”, 2015, accessed 1 August 2016.

⁸ On public work in Hungary, see further: Ildikó, Asztalos Morell, “Social farming as a means of poverty reduction in rural Hungary”, 2015, accessed 1 August 2016.

The Example of Hernádszentandrás

Hernádszentandrás, the village with 445 inhabitants in north-eastern Hungary that is the focus of this paper, also followed the historical path outlined above. Today 70-80% of working-age inhabitants are unemployed and live below the standard of living evident in other villages in the region. The village lies on the Hernád river, equidistant (35 km) from the two big cities in the region, Miskolc in Hungary and Kassa/Kosice in Slovakia. It has excellent quality soil. Historically, the source of livelihood here was agricultural production and animal husbandry. The reorganisation of agriculture in the second half of the 20th century was followed by a considerable change in the population profile: children, whose parents had been farmers, moved into the city, while the houses left vacant in the village were occupied by new, mainly Roma families, from neighbouring villages, many of whom engaged in a different life-strategy from the Roma who had previously lived there over a long period of time: they did not cultivate their gardens. Before 1990, Romas made up 5–10% of the local population, a proportion that has now increased to 40%. Families who have lived in the village for generations, and who could revive the values of traditional peasant farming, now constitute just a small minority of the inhabitants.

Life in the village was made difficult, not only by the sudden rise in unemployment from the 2000s and its ageing population, but also by the unpredictable economic policy of the successive governments that had a negative effect on agriculture. Small villages (with fewer than 500 inhabitants) were placed in an almost impossible position, and rural development policies have still not succeeded in solving the livelihood problems of the people. For example, primary schools have been closed down or merged. As a result, the possibility of gaining an education in Hernádszentandrás ceased in 1994, and children travel by public transport to school in the neighbouring village. The village has no kindergarten, medical care, pharmacy, post office, or library. It lacks civil organisations and an entrepreneurial stratum; the only force holding the community together being the church.

By the 2000s, the village no longer had the material or intellectual potential that could have shifted it out of its rut, or which could have initiated, and helped, its integration into the market economy. This task was undertaken by the municipality, local government and its leader, the young mayor. (This very resourceful young man, in his thirties, had studied political science at university and saw it as a challenge to apply his knowledge to “revive” his native village.) He was elected mayor in 2006 and since then – together with his family – he has become the driving force and key figure of the village’s development. In this context, he

first had to shape the population into a community: they organised, for example, celebrations to revive their traditions, in which local dishes served to symbolize their sense of belonging together. To become the local leader accepted by the community, the young mayor demonstrated that, although he was a man, he could cook those dishes himself! Moreover, the municipality published a book summing up the past and roots of the village.

In 2010, when the programme for the organic farm was being developed, it was agreed that existing resources – good quality soil and existing manpower – needed to be utilized, in order to set in motion sustainable development of the village's economy. The people of Hernádszentandrás relearned the basics of agriculture, food production, self-sufficiency, and of a sustainable economy. They set up an organic farm with the primary aim of providing the local population with cheap, good quality food and, at the same time, to also provide work opportunities for the long-term unemployed. The municipality is aiming to combat welfare dependency resulting from marginalization, with a method-based social and agricultural project, to create new, market-based employment. It also aspires to combine the goals of ecological, social and economic sustainability in a complex way to achieve a successful outcome for the people of the village. The municipality as entrepreneur – thus far exceeding its public administration tasks and responsibilities – strove to create jobs.⁹ Most of the land that was used was owned by local government. The municipality created a farm, that not only covers their own needs but also produces food for the market, thereby ensuring an earning opportunity for those who work on the farm.



1. The organic farm in Hernád/Bioszentandrás: “Like a big family” (Photo: Anikó Bádi, Hernádszentandrás, 2016).

⁹ On social farming see, Ildikó, Asztalos Morell, “Social farming as a means of poverty reduction in rural Hungary”, 2015, accessed 1 August 2016.

To launch the project the municipality applied for, and won funding from the European Union. Further applications for funding enabled them to carry out developments and buy machines and equipment. They received professional advice on the setting up of the organic farm from a British agricultural engineer living in Hungary. And the daily work of the market garden is still directed by a retired agricultural engineer from the city of Miskolc. The participants in the programme learned the basics of chemical-free, ecological farming from these experts in the course of several adult training courses.

When the organic garden was started around 30 people from the village – independently of age group and ethnic identity – joined on a voluntary basis. At first they worked in the garden without payment and in their free time. They became familiar with new plants and the basics of organic gardening (They produce crops without using chemicals, only natural materials are applied to control pests, such as nettle, horsetail, comfrey, against which using cow's milk is used as a spray; different plants are grown side by side in order to deter each other's pests.) Some of those working on the farm had already been cultivating the garden around their own homes, but it was only then that others among them began to do gardening at home and to keep small animals.

Today, a total of 20 persons work in the various branches of the organic farm operation: production, processing and sales. The organic farm programme represents an opportunity for workers to earn additional income supplementary to the unemployment aid they receive from the state. In its initial years, participants received only a share of the produce of the farm for use in their own kitchens, but the revenues have now increased to a level where the organic farm operation is able to pay more and more workers an annual, regular wage. This trend will increase in the future, because, in addition to agricultural production, the management of the farm now process their produce in a small plant and sell it.

Vegetables, soft fruit and 30 kinds of herbs are grown on 2.5 hectares of land, and lavender on a further 2000 m² of ground. In 2015, they planted fruit trees in a 1-hectare area. When selecting the varieties of fruit trees they aimed to preserve the old gene stock typical of the region. In addition to outdoor cultivation, they are able to work throughout the year by using 9 polytunnels and a 150m² glasshouse that can be heated. In summer, they are able to irrigate the ground with a drip system that waters the whole garden.

Those who did not join the organic farm initiative thought at the time that the whole venture was doomed to failure from the outset. Now, seeing the present success of the farm, they envy the workers' permanent employment. "They envy the praise we get!" – said one of

the workers proudly. Opinions in the village, regarding organic farming, are mixed. Some appreciate the fact that they have been able to combine their efforts in order to give new life to the village. But there are others who look down on them and fail to understand the whole purpose of the project: “My garden is organic too, I don’t use sprays because they’re expensive, but it doesn’t have as many weeds as they do”, – said a woman in the village who thinks, that plants left between the rows of cultivated plants are not there for the purposes of soil cover, but are really weeds that should be removed.

The mayor works as a manager (seeking funds, coordinating the work, and giving presentations on the results), and the other key person of the whole project is the commercial manager. Thanks to her training and experience in the area of product development and sales, she also knows how to maintain relations with the customers and the workers. The secret of their success is that they very consciously built up their own brand. Its name was created from the name of the village, so that Hernádszentandrás became Bioszentandrás.¹⁰ They conduct continuous market research and map buyers’ demands, and adjust the annual planting plan for the garden accordingly.

The range of products they sell is expanding, and the workers’ ideas and knowledge in terms of product development are incorporated in to their planning, as well as the advice of experts. One of the Roma workers, for example, knows how to weave baskets from willow rods, an activity that is a family tradition. The idea of offering their produce at organic markets in these baskets was a big success and they now also sell the baskets themselves as handcraft products. Another idea came from a woman who had previously worked as a seamstress: they fill little sachets with lavender as gift objects that also popularize the Bioszentandrás brand.



2. Fresh, packed vegetables (Photo: Anikó Báti, Hernádszentandrás, 2016)

¹⁰ Bioszentandrás. www.bioszentandras.hu, accessed 1 August 2016.

Product sales are handled from the building known mysteriously as “Everything that”, meaning everything related to sales. Vegetables ordered by customers are brought there from the garden, where they are carefully selected, weighed and packed, because only the best quality produce is sold. Since the summer of 2015 the organic farm has had a cool chamber for storage. (Any slightly faulty vegetables brought in from the garden now end up as rejects on the compost heap in quite large quantities. The management of the farm have not yet found a way to make use of less-than-perfect produce. Traditional peasant farming families had an entirely different attitude in this respect: nothing was allowed to go to waste.)

The annual order and structure of market gardening differs considerably from the earlier peasant farming traditions and are basically determined by constantly-changing market demands. The Bioszentandrás farm is regular supplier to four restaurants, two of which belong in the fine dining category! The quality demands of these restaurants are the main yardstick for the standard of production and sales. The highest quality produce from organic farming is at the same time their trademark; they need such produce throughout the year and the demand thus overrules the cyclical nature of production. The schedule of work in the garden is largely regulated by these restaurants’ requirements. For example, as soon as spring onions are harvested, the next crop is planted in their place to ensure a constant supply. The 30 kinds of herbs and many different salad greens also meet the restaurants’ demands. Most of these herbs and greens were not known or used earlier by those working in the garden or by the villagers. Only a few of them have tried, and come to like herbs with roast meats, for example. They had never tasted rucola or mizuma greens either. Even spinach was unknown to the villagers. They were surprised to learn that a plant they knew as a weed¹¹ is eaten by others as a salad. Salad as a dish is a novelty in Hungarian cuisine and it does not yet have a permanent place in this context. In Hernádszentandrás, too, it appears only on the tables of the younger age group; older people, especially men, are not very fond of it.

¹¹ For example pigweed, *Amaranthus retroflexus*
https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sz%C5%91r%C3%B6s_diszn%C3%B3par%C3%A9j, accessed 1 August 2016.



3. Products from the “House of Flavours” (Photo: Anikó Báti, Hernádszentandrás, 2016).

In September 2015 the municipality also built a processing plant and organic kitchen that they call “House of Flavours”. They modernized the interior of the 140-year-old former school building. Nowadays, modern machines are used to produce 10 to 12 products, such as jams, and they also have a 10-tray drying machine that operates on solar power. Some of the workers had earlier worked in the garden, but after attending further courses they undertook this work, as is a big step forward and source of great pride for them. Among other things they make ketchup, rose hip jam, aubergine and onion chutney, and pickles. The recipes were developed collectively, also incorporating the workers’ ideas. (Several of the workers also made them at home for their families and the children liked them, but such relishes are not central elements of Hungarian cuisine. Among the workers’ families, the men and older people are not so fond of them.) They are continually experimenting with flavours and products. For example, with diabetics in mind, they are trying to use the plant stevia as a sweetener instead of sugar in their products. This plant is still a novelty in Hungary, but it is cultivated at the organic farm. Artificial preservatives are not used in the organic farm products – in fact the cooking methods used resemble in many ways the cooking practices of old-fashioned peasant kitchens. But, at the same time, everything is measured very precisely and the most up-to-date kitchen technology is used in the in the processing plant. To ensure operation throughout the year the management of the farm has signed contracts with farmer suppliers in the region and process their produce in this facility. The management has also built up a successful retail network because they sell not only fresh vegetables, herbs and products locally but also in the bigger towns, even in Kassa/Košice in Slovakia. The success of the organic farm project has made the settlement attractive for business people. Recently a private entrepreneur was just beginning to lay the foundations of a fruit and vegetable

processing plant. When completed, this will also mean more jobs and sales opportunities for farmers in the region.

The gate of the organic farm is open to buyers and visitors. The management of the farm try to inform as many people as possible about the approach they represent, that is, a health-conscious way of life. They organise “planting, gardening” days for families and schools, giving an introduction to the basics of chemical-free farming, new plants and flavours. It is a clear indication of the inclusive, open spirit represented by the project and its community-creating role, that on these “planting days”, for example, healthy children and children with disabilities work together in the garden, helping each other. The garden also supplies a restaurant in Miskolc that is operated by persons living with disabilities.

The management of the farm aims for the future to expand the range of goods they produce as well as the circle of local farmers linked to them as suppliers, and increase the number of shops participating in sales. They would also like to expand the scope of services linked to the organic farm, for example by taking advantage of the possibilities offered by popular gastro tourism. The system of production, processing and sales – based on self-motivation and skills of participant – is now well established and it is becoming independent from state subsidies. The municipality aims to gradually withdraw from its coordinating role into the background once the venture is able to function wholly on a market basis.

The traditional peasant knowledge, values and norms needed for the cultivation of the land gradually lost their value and justification over the past 50-70 years. But now this knowledge has gained new life. It is capable not only of renewing agriculture but it can also function as a community-building force.

The Bioszentandrás project points far beyond chemical-free farming. The whole village has begun to develop and there have been major EU-sponsored improvements in infrastructure: mains water has been introduced, sewage drains and a telephone network has been built, and there are no longer any neglected, uncultivated household plots. The project is not only of outstanding importance for the development of the local market-based economy and job creation, it can be the key to community development, utilization of land, and to future of the village. It is an innovative way of becoming a self-help, collaborative community that can serve as an example for other villages in the region. It was the emphasis placed on community building and sustainable development that raised it above similar initiatives: it has also received recognition at European level – Bioszentandrás won a prize for social and welfare innovation in a competition announced by the European Investment Bank. The long-

term impact of community building – included the integration of the Roma minority – requires further research.

The project is in line with new development directions in which sustainable agricultural development also serves to preserve and build the local community – for example the collectively-cultivated gardens of housing estates in cities or the increasing number of eco-villages.¹² Communities of producers and consumers are being built between cities and their agglomerations, based on personal connections between farmer and customer, on commitment to ecological sustainability, and on the turning away from, and protesting against, the global product range of supermarkets.

Báti, Anikó PhD senior research fellow, works for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Ethnology. (bati.aniko@gmail.com) Author of many papers (The Role of the Bread in Hungarian Diet Today. *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, 57/2. (2012) 253-261.; The Return of the Wood-Fired Baking Oven in Hungary. In Patricia Lysaght (ed.): *The Return of the Traditional Food*. Lund: Lund University. (2013) 118-127.; Cooking Know-How: Virtual and Personal Transmission of Skills. A Hungarian Example. In Patricia Lysaght – Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska (ed.): *Food and Internet*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition. (2015) 221-230.) and a book (Régi és új elemek a cserépfalui konyhán. [Kitchens: Old and new elements in Cserépfalu Today.] Budapest: Magyar Néprajzi Társaság. (2008.)) about the recent Hungarian food culture.

¹² On eco-villages as reactions to specific social problems see, Judit, Farkas: “Nincsenek receptek”. A magyar ökofalvak táplálkozásantropológiai vizsgálata (“There are no recipes.” Nutrition Anthropological Survey of Hungarian Eco-Villages),

http://tabula.neprajz.hu/neprajz.07.16a.php?bm=1&as=418&kr=A_10_%3D%222015%2016%281-2%29%22,

accessed 1 August 2016.